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Reflective Thinking and Reflective Teaching among Iranian EFL Teachers: Do Gender and Teaching Experience Make a Difference?

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Abstract

The present study investigated the relationship between reflective teaching and reflective thinking of Iranian EFL teachers regarding gender and teaching experience. To this end, 233 teachers were surveyed using English Language Teaching Reflection Inventory (Akbari, Behzadpoor, & Dadvand, 2010), and Teachers' Reflective Thinking Questionnaire (Choy & Oo, 2012). The results of Pearson product moment correlation indicated there was a significant positive correlation between reflective teaching and reflective thinking of Iranian EFL teachers. The results of Independent Samples t-tests revealed significant differences between male and female Iranian EFL teachers in terms of both reflective teaching and reflective thinking. The results of one-way ANOVA and Tukey post-hoc analysis respectively indicated that teaching experience significantly differentiated Iranian EFL teachers concerning reflective teaching, i.e. high-experienced teachers significantly outperformed mid-experienced teachers who, in turn, outperformed their low-experienced counterparts in this regard.

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Keywords: reflective teaching; reflective thinking; Iranian EFL teachers; teaching experience; gender

1. Introduction

Reflective thinking plays a particularly important part in every day's activities. Whenever one is doing an activity, he or she might go through a thinking process to reflect on the activity either while the activity is being done or after it has finished. Teaching practice is also one of those activities, which is principally concerned with language teachers and is highly influenced by a multitude of factors, one of which is reflective thinking.

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It is not a simple task to define reflective thinking. Many scholars (e.g., Akbari, 2007; Farrell, 2007) have referred to the wide range of meaning components reflective thinking carries. It is not a newly-born concept in the realm of learning and teaching, in general, and language learning and teaching, in particular. Indeed, it dates back to the works and ideas of certain key theorists, each focusing on different dimensions of this process. Dewey (1933), as the most pioneering figure, defines reflective thinking as “an active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that supports it and the conclusion to which it tends” (Dewey, 1933, p. 9).

Schon (1983) developed the concept of reflection and introduced two new terms: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. According to (Schon, 1983), the former has to do with thinking and doing. Schon explains that thinking and doing result in modifying teaching practices with the aim of improving learning. On the other hand, the latter occurs when teacher retrospectively considers and analyzes his/her teaching performance. According to (Schon, 1983), reflection usually comes to existence when a problem appears in teaching practice.

Reflective teaching - the product of reflective thinking - is a process of expanding and deepening the range of the questions you ask about your teaching practices, adopting an organized and systematic approach to teaching practices, and collaborating with other colleagues having the same questions (Robertson & Yiamouyiannis, 1996). It is considered as “a cycle of thought and action based on professional experience” (Wellington, 1991, p. 4).

Reflective teaching is regarded as a necessary characteristic of efficient teachers, a major element of teacher training programs, and one of the factors which chiefly influences teaching practice. Consequently, a substantial body of study has been conducted on it. However, it seems no study has investigated the association between the theoretical side and practical side of the reflection coin, and the role of gender and teaching experience in this regard in the EFL context of Iran. Therefore, the current study explored the following research questions.

1.1. Research questions

1. Is there any significant association between Iranian EFL teachers' reflective teaching and reflective thinking?
2. Is there any significant difference between male and female Iranian EFL teachers regarding reflective teaching?
3. Is there any significant difference between male and female Iranian EFL teachers regarding reflective thinking?
4. Does teaching experience significantly differentiate Iranian EFL teachers regarding reflective teaching?
5. Does teaching experience significantly differentiate Iranian EFL teachers regarding reflective thinking?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants included 233 Iranian EFL teachers selected based on convenience sampling. Their age ranged from 20 to 45 years; and their years of teaching experience varied from 1 to 20 years. The study was conducted in the academic year of 2013-2014.

2.2. Instruments

Two instruments were employed for the purpose of data collection. The first one was English Language Teaching Reflection Inventory developed and validated by Akbari, Behzadpoor, and Dadvand (2010) in Iranian context. It consists of 29 five-point Likert-scale items whose Cronbach's alpha reliability was estimated to be 0.91. The second instrument was Teachers' Reflective Thinking Questionnaire developed by Choy and Oo (2012) in Malaysian context. It includes 33 items in Likert-scale format. In order to ensure its validity in Iranian context, it was expert-viewed and factor-analyzed. The results of factor analysis (KMO= 0.68) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($p = 0.00$) indicated that the questionnaire possessed an acceptable rate of validity. Running Cronbach's alpha consistency, the reliability of the questionnaire was estimated to be 0.82 in the present study.

2.3. Procedure

After ensuring the validity and reliability of the instruments utilized in the study, they were distributed among the participants. However, before doing this, the purpose of the study and the guidelines on how to respond to the questionnaires were explained. The participants were assured that their information would be kept confidential and that the questionnaires could be responded anonymously. It took about 20 minutes for the participants to complete the questionnaires. SPSS (version 20) was utilized to apply parametric statistical analyses including Pearson product moment correlation (question 1), Independent Samples t-test (questions 2 and 3), one-way ANOVA and post-hoc Tukey (questions 4 and 5) to the data collected.

3. Results

To answer research question 1, Pearson product moment correlation was run, the results of which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The relationship between reflective teaching and reflective thinking

		Reflective Thinking
Reflective Teaching	Pearson Correlation	.56**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.00
	N	233

As the results in Table 1 indicate, there was a statistically significant positive relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' reflective thinking and their reflective teaching ($N = 233$, $r = 0.56$, $p = 0.00$).

To answer research questions 2 and 3, two separate Independent Samples t-tests were applied, the results of which are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. The results of Independent Samples t-test for male and female Iranian EFL teachers' reflective teaching

		Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means			Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)			Lower	Upper
R. Teaching	Equal variances assumed	1.40	.238	2.86	231	.00	6.26	2.18	1.96	10.57
	Equal variances not assumed			2.98	212.92	.00	6.26	2.10	2.12	10.40

As shown in Table 2, the two groups were significantly different regarding reflective teaching ($p < 0.05$); that is, male EFL teachers ($N = 90$, $M = 97.48$, $SD = 14.46$) outperformed their female counterparts ($N = 143$, $M = 91.21$, $SD = 17.27$) regarding reflective teaching.

Table 3. The results of Independent Samples t-test for male and female Iranian EFL teachers' reflective thinking

		Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
R. Thinking	Equal variances assumed	8.43	.00	.49	231	.01	4.88	1.95	1.02	8.73
	Equal variances not assumed			2.75	212.92	.00	4.88	1.77	1.39	8.37

As indicated in Table 3, the two groups were significantly different with regard to reflective thinking ($p < 0.05$); that is, male EFL teachers ($N = 90$, $M = 120.16$, $SD = 10.79$) outperformed their female counterparts ($N = 143$, $M = 114.45$, $SD = 16.67$) concerning reflective thinking.

To answer research question 4, a one-way ANOVA and a Tukey post-hoc analysis were conducted, the results of which are summarized in Tables 4 and 5 respectively.

Table 4. The results of ANOVA for Iranian EFL teachers' reflective teaching with regard to teaching experience

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	10403.89	2	5201.94	22.68	.00
Within Groups	52734.36	230	229.28		
Total	63138.25	232			

Table 5. The results of Tukey analysis for Iranian EFL teachers' reflective teaching with regard to teaching experience

(I) Teaching Experience	(J) Teaching Experience	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low-experienced group	Mid-experienced group	-8.61*	2.50	.00	-14.52	-2.71
	High-experienced group	-18.75*	2.94	.00	-25.69	-11.81
Mid-experienced group	Low-experienced group	8.61*	2.50	.00	2.71	14.52
	High-experienced group	-10.13*	3.45	.01	-18.29	-1.98
High-experienced group	Low-experienced group	18.75*	2.94	.00	11.81	25.69
	Mid-experienced group	10.13*	3.45	.01	1.98	18.29

As the results in Tables 4 and 5 reveal, teaching experience significantly differentiated Iranian EFL teachers regarding reflective teaching at the $p < 0.05$ level [$F(2, 230) = 22.68$, $p = 0.00$]; and high-experienced group ($M = 108.03$, $SD = 11.45$) significantly outperformed mid-experienced group ($M = 97.90$, $SD = 12.36$) who, in turn, outperformed their low-experienced counterparts ($M = 89.28$, $SD = 16.52$).

To answer research question 5, a one-way ANOVA and a Tukey post-hoc analysis were run, the results of which are presented in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6. The results of ANOVA for Iranian EFL teachers' reflective thinking with regard to teaching experience

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2412.525	2	1206.263	5.637	.04
Within Groups	49218.007	230	213.991		
Total	51630.532	232			

Table 7. The results of Tukey analysis for Iranian EFL teachers' reflective thinking with regard to teaching experience

(I) Teaching Experience	(J) Teaching Experience	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low-experienced group	Mid-experienced group	-5.35	2.42	.07	11.07	.35
	High-experienced group	-8.30*	2.84	.01	15.01	-1.60
Mid-experienced group	Low-experienced group	5.35	2.42	.07	-.35	11.07
	High-experienced group	-2.94	3.33	.65	10.82	4.93

High-experienced group	group					
	Low-experienced group	8.30*	2.84	.01	1.60	15.01
	Mid-experienced group	2.94	3.33	.65	-4.93	10.82

As shown in Tables 6 and 7, teaching experience differentiated Iranian EFL teachers regarding reflective thinking at the $p < 0.05$ level [$F(2, 230) = 5.63, p = 0.04$]; and high-experienced group ($M = 122.72, SD = 8.29$) significantly outperformed low-experienced group ($M = 114.41, SD = 16.68$). However, the mid-experienced group ($M = 119.77, SD = 10.09$) did not significantly differ from the other two groups.

4. Discussion

The first research question explored the nature of the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' reflective thinking and their reflective teaching. The results of Pearson product moment correlation indicated that there was a statistically significant positive relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' reflective thinking and their reflective teaching. In other words, the higher the reflective thinking of EFL teachers, the higher their reflective teaching.

This finding is in accordance with those of (Minott, 2006) who, in a case study, found that there was a relationship between teachers' teaching philosophy and personal choice. Indeed, he made a connection between teaching philosophy (i.e. thinking) and teaching practice (i.e. teaching) and claimed that there was movement from philosophy towards practice.

The findings of the present study are also in line with those of (Leitch and Day, 2000) who conducted a study for the purpose of clarifying Dewey's ideas about reflective thinking. They claimed that teachers able to think reflectively are capable of building and applying a set of attitudes concerning teaching practice. According to them, teachers need more than developing reflective thinking to be regarded as a reflective teacher. It can be understood that reflective thinking is necessary, but not sufficient for EFL teachers. When reflective thinking results in a reflective practice or when teachers' reflective thoughts and actions go hand in hand, it would seem to suffice.

The presence of such a relatively strong positive relationship might highlight the reliance of reflective teaching on reflective thinking. However, it must be borne in mind that thinking and practicing need to be differentiated. That is, a teacher able to think reflectively might not necessarily be able to teach reflectively. There is a certain amount of reflective thinking in everybody including teachers. However, what counts is the extent to which this thinking capability is applied in practice. Particularly, the extent to which this underlying thinking ability (i.e. reflective thinking) is operationalized in language learning classroom (i.e. reflective teaching) is of utmost importance.

The second research question investigated whether gender differentiated Iranian EFL teachers regarding reflective teaching. The results of Independent Samples t-test indicated that two groups are significantly different regarding reflective teaching; that is, male EFL teachers outperformed their female counterparts regarding reflective teaching.

The third research question investigated whether male and female Iranian EFL teachers were different regarding reflective thinking. The results of Independent Samples t-test showed that the two groups were significantly different with regard to reflective thinking; that is, male EFL teachers outperformed their female counterparts regarding their reflective thinking.

To explore the fourth research question, a one-way ANOVA and then a Tukey post-hoc analysis were run, the results of which revealed that teaching experience significantly differentiated Iranian EFL teachers regarding reflective teaching; and high-experienced group significantly outperformed mid-experienced group who, in turn, outperformed their low-experienced counterparts.

To answer the last research question, a one-way ANOVA and then a post-hoc Tukey test were applied whose results showed that teaching experience differentiated Iranian EFL teachers regarding reflective thinking and that high-experienced group significantly outperformed low-experienced group. However, the mid-experienced group was not significantly different from the other groups.

The results of questions 4 and 5 indicated that teaching experience plays an eminent role in both reflective teaching and reflective thinking. In other words, as the teachers' years of teaching experience increase, their levels of reflective teaching and reflective thinking also rise. Considering the fact that most of the teachers who possessed

high level of reflective teaching and reflective thinking as well as high teaching experience were middle-aged, one possible conclusion is that there might be a link between thinking ability and ageing. Thinking ability naturally grows as teachers age, and encounter and accumulate various teaching experiences. Also, it goes without saying that reflective thinking is a subcomponent of the whole thinking ability. Thus, it might be concluded that the higher the teaching experience, the higher the reflective teaching and thinking.

The findings of the study might have some implications for language teaching and learning. Firstly, the findings might imply that teacher trainers need to pay more attention to develop reflective thinking and teaching in their practicing teachers. Secondly, the potentiality of teacher training courses for increasing the level of reflective thinking and teaching in novice teachers should not be neglected. In fact, teacher training courses by experienced and knowledgeable teacher trainers are suggested to improve the quality of teaching practices of novice language teachers through reflective thinking and teaching development. Finally, language teachers are recommended to take reflective thinking and teaching into consideration due to their direct effects on successful teaching practices.

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